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AUTHOR Kurth, Ruth Justine; Greenlaw, M. Jean
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ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to describe the comprehension instruction that occurs during formal reading classes in elementary schools. Sixteen kindergarten through sixth grade teachers were observed during 48 hours of reading instruction over a three-day period. Nine specific categories of comprehension and six general categories of reading instruction were coded by four observers. The results indicated that 32% of formal instructional time was spent in comprehension instruction; 35% in phonics and structural analysis; 8% in silent reading; 4% in oral reading; and 19% in noninstructional and transitional activities. During comprehension instruction, teachers spent the majority of time assessing comprehension, checking comprehension assignments, and using comprehension application activities. The findings support previous work which concluded that very little direct instruction of comprehension is done in elementary school classrooms. (Author/FL)

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Research and Practices in Comprehension Instruction In Elementary Classrooms

Ruth Justine Kurth and M. Jean Greenlaw

North Texas State University

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Comprehension Observations

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Research and Practices In Comprehension Instruction
in Elementary Classrooms

The purpose of this observational study was to describe the comprehension instruction which occurs during formal reading classes in elementary schools. Previous research investigating classroom comprehension instruction has generated a concern about the quality and quantity of such instruction. After conducting an extensive observational study, Durkin (1979) reported that: a. practically no comprehension instruction was done in classrooms and that comprehension assessment was the predominant activity; b. that teachers neglected comprehension because they were too busy teaching phonics, structural analysis or word meanings, and; c. that teachers were assignment givers and checkers.

Hodges (1980), however, has questioned both Durkin's definition of comprehension and the way in which she operationalized it in her scheme for categorizing teaching behavior. The present investigation was designed to provide more direct observational data about reading instruction in order to determine the validity of Durkin's findings.

The research design used in this study differed from that used by Durkin in two major respects. First, because Durkin's definition of comprehension was generally criticized as too narrow and confining, the definition of comprehension instruction was broadened. Also, teachers from four grade levels in elementary schools were observed

rather than having observations from only one grade level as Durkin did.

Procedure

Subjects

The subjects for this study were sixteen certified elementary classroom teachers, four each from grades kindergarten, two, four, and six. Each of the teachers was chosen randomly from a pool of all grade level teachers in a suburban school district in Texas. Each teacher randomly selected was asked to participate in the study. It had been planned that if a teacher refused to participate, an alternate would be chosen. However, all of the first 16 teachers selected agreed to participate in the study.

Observation Schedule

Each of the 16 teachers was observed during three sixty-minute periods during the regularly scheduled reading classes. Because reading classes were longer than an hour, the observation times were scheduled to sample each section of the reading periods. The observations were made on three successive school days, with almost all of the observations done on either a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday or a Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday cycle. A total of 48 hours of observation time was included in the study.

The observations were made by two university faculty members and two doctoral students in reading education. The use of four observers made it possible to have each teacher observed by three

different researchers. All observations were made between October 20, 1980 and November 14, 1980.

Observation Instrumentation

The observation instrument used in this study was a modification of that used by Durkin in her 1979 study. Because the researchers felt that the comprehension instruction category defined by Durkin as "the teacher does something to help one or more children understand more than a single word" was too vague, nine specific categories of comprehension instruction were used in this study. These categories include:

1. Comprehension instruction/assignment checks--Teacher says or does something to help one or more students understand more than a single word by directing an activity in which he/she checks a class or homework assignment by explaining wrong answers, expanding on correct answers, questioning, discussing the assignment.

2. Comprehension instruction/application--Teacher says or does something to help one or more students understand more than a single word by directing an activity which provides practice of concepts previously taught. (Ex. questioning, discussion.)

3. Comprehension instruction/helps with assignment--Teacher says or does something to help one or more students understand more than a single word by assisting one or more students with an assignment that focuses on comprehension of connected text. (Ex. asking questions, suggesting that parts be reread, asking for paraphrases.)

4. Comprehension instruction/prediction--Teacher says or does something to help one or more students understand more than a single word by directing one or more students to predict outcomes in text or verbal discourse.

5. Comprehension instruction/preparation--Teacher says or does something to help one or more students understand more than a single word by preparing one or more students to read text through directing attention to vocabulary, eliciting children's experiences, or attempting to motivate the children.

6. Comprehension instruction/strategies--Teacher says or does something to help a student understand more than a single word by giving specific information on how to identify a main idea, find a topic sentence, skim a paragraph, locate information, etc.

7. Comprehension instruction/review--Teacher says or does something to help one or more students understand more than a single word by reviewing or repeating earlier instruction.

8. Comprehension Assessment--Teacher asks questions to determine comprehension of connected text.

9. Comprehension/gives assignment--Teacher gives an assignment which will require students to understand connected text.

The other categories included in the observation instrument were the same as those used by Durkin. The general categories used included phonics and structural analysis, silent reading, oral reading, teacher reads aloud, transitional activities, and non-instructional activities.

The observational focus was the specific teacher behavior during reading instruction. The observed behavior was coded by the observer and the recordings were made in terms of real time by seconds. This procedure made it possible to analyze total time spent on specific activities and to determine percentages of instructional time devoted to specific teaching activities.

The aim of the observations was to describe the actual teaching behavior. No attempt was made to place a subjective value judgement on the quality of the instruction.

Observer Training

All four observers had participated in the rewriting of the observation instrument. Therefore, each observer was already very familiar with the coding system used on the instrument. However, in order to ensure observer consistency in coding behaviors, twenty hours of training time were spent observing video tapes and actual classroom reading lessons. After the observations were completed, observers' codings were compared and discussed until uniformity of coding was achieved.

Results

After the observations were completed, a summary sheet which listed the amount of time spent in each of the various instructional activities was compiled for each subject. The percentage of total reading classtime spent in each activity was also calculated. The

summary sheets for each teacher were then compiled into summary sheets for each grade level. The specific observation reports were also studied in order to determine specific patterns of teaching activity.

The analysis of the summary sheets compiled from all of the grade level reports showed that an average of 32 per cent of the instructional time during the formal reading instruction was spent in some form of comprehension instruction; 35 per cent of the instructional time was spent in teaching phonic and structural analysis; 8 per cent of the time was spent in silent reading; 4 per cent of the time was spent in oral reading; 2 per cent of the time the teacher read to the children; and 19 per cent of the time was spent in transitional and non-instructional activities.

When the results were analyzed by grade level, it was found that in sixth grade 49 per cent of the instructional time was spent in comprehension activities; 18 per cent of the time was spent in phonics and structural analysis; 12 per cent of the time was spent in silent reading; 2 per cent of the time was spent in oral reading; and 19 per cent of the time was spent in non-instructional activities.

At the fourth grade level, 44 per cent of the instructional time was spent in comprehension activities; 20 per cent of the time was spent in phonics and structural analysis; 9 per cent of the time was spent in silent reading, 3 per cent of the time was spent in oral reading; and 24 per cent of the time was spent in non-instructional activities.

At the second grade level, 31 per cent of the instructional time was spent in comprehension activites; 32 per cent of the time was spent

in phonics and structural analysis; 11 per cent of the time was spent in silent reading; 13 per cent of the time was spent in oral reading; and 13 per cent of the time was spent in non-instructional activities.

At the kindergarten level, 3 per cent of the instructional time was spent in comprehension activities; 68 per cent of the time was spent in phonics and structural analysis; the teacher read aloud 9 per cent of the time; and 20 per cent of the time was spent in non-instructional activities.

Insert Table 1 about here

Because the major focus of the study was comprehension instruction, an analysis was also made of the specific types of comprehension instruction used by teachers. The results of the comprehension analysis showed that teachers spent 919 ofthe 2,880 minutes teaching comprehension.

The comprehension categories coded in the study were Comprehension Assessment, Comprehension Assignment, Comprehension Application, Comprehension Aid on Assignment, Comprehension Review, Comprehension Prediction, Comprehension Preparation, Comprehension Strategies, and Comprehension Assignment Check.

Of the 919 minutes of comprehension teaching, 186 minutes of instruction were classified as Comprehension Assessment; 179 minutes were classified as Comprehension Application; 134 minutes were classified as Comprehension Assignment Check; 108 minutes were classified as Comprehension Aid on Assignment; 104 minutes were classified as Comprehension

Table 1

Teaching Time for Each Instructional Category

Grade	Comprehension	Transitional and Non-instructional	Phonics and Structural Analysis	Silent Reading	Oral Reading	Teacher Reads to Children	Totals
K	22 m* 3 %	144 m. 20 %	490 m. 68 %	-----	----	64 m. 9%	720 m.
2	224 m. 31 %	95 m. 13 %	234 m. 32 %	78 m. 11 %	89 m. 13 %	----	720 m.
4	318 m. 44 %	174 m. 24 %	144 m. 20 %	64 m. 9 %	20 m. 3 %	----	720 m.
6	355 m. 49 %	136 m. 19 %	130 m. 18 %	85 m. 12 %	14 m. 2 %	----	720 m.
Total of all Grades	919 m. 32 %	549 m. 19 %	988 m. 35 %	227 m. 8 %	123 m. 4 %	64 m. 2 %	2,880 m.

*time is in minutes

Strategies; 70 minutes were classified as Comprehension Assignment; 65 minutes were classified as Comprehension Preparation; 51 minutes were classified as Comprehension Review; and 22 minutes were classified as Comprehension Prediction.

The percentage of total comprehension instruction time for each comprehension category was also calculated. The largest percentage of teaching time was devoted to Comprehension Assessment (20 per cent). Comprehension Application was taught 19 per cent of the time; Comprehension Assignments were checked during 15 per cent of the time; Comprehension Aid on Assignments was given 12 per cent of the time; Comprehension Strategies were taught 11 per cent of the time; Comprehension Assignments were given during 8 per cent of the time; Comprehension Preparation was done 7 per cent of the time; Comprehension Review was done 6 per cent of the time: and Comprehension Prediction was taught 2 per cent of the time.

Insert Table 2 about here

The number of minutes spent in each category of comprehension instruction was also calculated for each grade level.

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

The first major finding of this study was that teachers spend an average of 32 per cent of formal reading instruction classtime teaching comprehension. Also, the amount of comprehension instruction increases

Table 2

Amount and Per Cent of Instruction in

Each Comprehension Category

Category of Comprehension	Assessment	Application	Assignment Check
Total Minutes	186 min.	179 min.	134 min.
Percentage of total Comprehension Instr.	20 %	19 %	15 %

Category of Comprehension	Aid on Assignments	Strategies	Assignment Given
Total Minutes	108 min.	104 min.	70 min.
Percentage of total Comprehension Instr.	12 %	11 %	8 %

Category of Comprehension	Preparation	Review	Prediction
Total Minutes	65 min.	51 min.	22 min.
Percentage of total Comprehension Instr.	7 %	6 %	2 %

Total Minutes 919 min.

Table 3

Instructional Time in Each Comprehension Category by Grade

Grade	Category of Comprehension	Assessment	Application	Assignment Check	Aid on Assignment	Strategies
6		73 min.	63 min.	41 min.	60 min.	57 min.
4		44 min.	76 min.	28 min.	42 min.	41 min.
2		62 min.	36 min.	57 min.	6 min.	6 min.
K		7 min.	4 min.	8 min.	0 min.	0 min.
	Total	186 min.	179 min.	134 min.	104 min.	104 min.

	Category of Comprehension	Assignment Given	Preparation	Review	Prediction	Total
6		34 min.	10 min.	12 min.	5 min.	355 min.
4		24 min.	34 min.	26 min.	3 min.	318 min.
2		11 min.	21 min.	13 min.	12 min.	224 min.
K		1 min.	0 min.	0 min.	2 min.	22 min.
	Total	70 min.	65 min.	51 min.	22 min.	919 min.

substantially as the grade level increases. However, the extremely small percentage of comprehension instruction at the kindergarten level is a cause for concern. Even though kindergarten teachers in the study cited comprehension as an important part of the reading process, they did not implement this belief into the formal reading instruction. It would seem difficult for beginning readers to understand that the purpose of reading is to obtain meaning unless meaning is stressed by their teachers as they begin learning to read.

While 32 per cent of the formal instruction was comprehension oriented, the majority of the time was spent on phonics and structural analysis skills. Even in 6th grade, when the bulk of these skills are already learned, teachers spent 18 per cent of the classtime on phonic and structural analysis skills, and the average percentage of time spent on these skills was 35 per cent. Thus, the results of this study agree with the finding of Durkin that teachers are very busy teaching phonetic analysis.

The study also showed that silent reading is done by children only about 8 per cent of the time in formal reading instruction. If children do not read outside of the reading group, they have very little opportunity to practice reading to attain the automatic levels required by mature reading. It would seem logical that in the reading period some provision would be made to provide substantial amounts of practice in the skill of silent reading.

Another major finding of this study is that is that teachers feel most comfortable when teaching comprehension through assessment. Of the specific comprehension categories coded in the study, comprehension assessment, followed closely by comprehension application, was the major category taught. On the teacher questionnaire, teachers felt very strongly that assessment was a particularly effective method for teaching comprehension, and their classroom practices evidenced this belief. Also, the assessment was primarily teacher directed.

Very little discussion or interaction from child to child occurred in the reading instruction observed. Even during that instruction coded as application and practice, where discussion should have been included, the flow of ideas went predominantly from teacher to pupil rather than from teacher to pupil to pupil.

A distinct difference could be seen in the approach used by teachers when teaching comprehension skills as compared to the approach used when teaching word recognition skills. In most instances, when a teacher was focusing on a phonetic skill, a period of direct instruction was used during which time the teacher explained specific strategies for the particular phonetic skill being taught. Then an assignment was given and the children proceeded with the task. Thus these lessons were coded as phonics strategy followed by phonics assignment followed by phonics application. However, during comprehension instruction, teachers rarely used comprehension strategies instruction; the most often coded pattern was comprehension assignment followed by comprehension application.

This finding of the study that teachers do not use direct instruction in comprehension strategy is substantially the same finding as Durkin reported and classified as "mentioning". When faced with teaching a comprehension task, teachers generally "mentioned the skill" which they wanted the children to learn with a cursory overview such as, "We're going to read these exercises to try and find some main ideas." Then children were asked to do the task immediately with no further instruction. Then as children did the assigned task, the teacher helped those students having difficulty with specific items on a one-to-one basis.

This typical lesson pattern was the probable cause for another major finding of the study that most comprehension instruction is done on a one-to-one basis. Teachers were more apt to discuss comprehension strategies with individual children having difficulty with specific items than to discuss comprehension strategies in whole group settings. This tendency also led to highly inflated comprehension percentages. For example, in one typical lesson a teacher was coded as spending 36 minutes in teaching comprehension application, but these 36 minutes were spent in discussions with 12 individual children, so that each child received an average of approximately 3 minutes of instruction.

In summary, when teachers teach comprehension they use two primary methods, one being the use of comprehension assessment after portions of text are read, and second, the use of discussions with individual pupils.

All of the reading classes observed, from kindergarten through sixth grade, used homogeneous grouping by ability for the reading instruction. All classrooms were divided into three reading groups. However, even though the classes were divided by ability levels, in most instances, the teacher taught the same lesson to each group with no modification in either content or methodology for the particular group. (In fact, one student who reported to his teacher that he knew the correct answer to a workbook question because he had listened in on the first group was chastised for listening to someone else's instruction.) Thus, it must be concluded that teachers do not use grouping to modify lessons for the levels within the group--rather it appears to be a procedure of habit.

The widespread use of grouping also seems to affect reading instruction in another way. All of the classes observed used a substantial portion of the class time for transitional activiites. The typical 60 minute-observation found teachers using an average of 19 per cent of this time for transitional and non-instructional activities. These relatively high amounts may have occurred because of the need to move three groups of children around the room each period. If grouping is not going to be used to improve individual instruction, it may only serve to use up valuable instructional time. The 19 per cent figure for non-instructional activities points up clearly the need for effective pre-service and in-service training in classroom management skills. There was a great deal of variance from teacher to teacher

in this category, thus pointing out that individual patterns of classroom management do affect the quality of instruction.

An incidental finding of the study concerned the teacher's stated objectives for lessons. For the most part, the objectives stated for the comprehension sections of the lessons were very vague. In many instances the teachers reported that the aim of their lesson was to "read the story in 'Rainbows' and do the workbook." Teachers were much more apt to have specific objectives when teaching specific phonics, structural, or word meaning objectives. It may be that, as Lanier and Floden (1979) report, teachers need help in having research knowledge translated into articulate sets of curricula. This need appears to be especially great in the area of reading comprehension.

Because of the broad definition of comprehension used in this study, the percentage of time reported as spent in comprehension instruction was significantly greater than that reported by Durkin. However, many of the instructional patterns reported by Durkin were evident in the classrooms observed in this study, and her major conclusion that very little direct instruction of comprehension is being done in elementary classrooms is substantiated by this study.

Implications for Further Research

An implication for further research which comes out of almost any study done in the classroom setting is the fact that we have few good research models to choose from when designing a study. The dramatic

differences which were found from teacher to teacher forcefully illustrate the considerable autonomy which classroom teachers exercise as they teaching reading classes in elementary schools. One of the basic aims of the research team in this study was determining a method of coding instruction in comprehension in as objective a manner as possible. But th- very coding system itself obviously cloaked substantial differences among teachers. As Erickson (1979) states, it may be time to relate generalizable findings back into case specific situations of actual schooling. Further studies of factors which change individual teacher behavior in a closely controlled setting may provide more fruitful research data than simply describing gross similarities and differences as was done in this study.

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